

Christopher Belser House
2 Amherst Street (northwest corner of
Amherst and East Bay Streets)
Charleston
Charleston County
South Carolina

HABS No. SC-203

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An Addendum to
House, now Baptist Goodwill Center
NW. corner Amherst and E. Bay Sts.
Charleston, South Carolina
in HABS Catalog Supplement (1959)

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
Followed by a set of architectural drawings

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Eastern Office, Design and Construction
143 South Third Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

ADDENDUM
FOLLOWS

CHRISTOPHER BELSER HOUSE

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Charleston, South Carolina
in HABS Catalog Supplement (1959)

Address: 2 Amherst Street (northwest corner of Amherst and East Bay Streets), Charleston, Charleston County, South Carolina.

Present Owner: Charleston Baptist Association (now offered for sale).

Present Occupant: Baptist Goodwill Center.

Present Use: Religious center.

Brief Statement of Significance: An early nineteenth-century town house with fine architectural details.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Original and Subsequent Owners: Christopher Belser. Purchased by Major Samuel Purcher in 1836; sold to Henry Grimke in 1840--kept by the Grimke family until about 1900 [Stoney].

According to another version, Jacob Belser, Theodore S. Marion, Theodore S. Dubose, Joshua T. Ward, Major Samuel Porcher, Henry Grimke, Joseph Leary, C. F. Klenke. Purchased by the Charleston Baptist Association in 1951 [News and Courier].

B. Date of Erection: Between 1804 and 1808 [Stoney].

C. Architect: Unknown. "... too unsophisticated to ascribe outright to Manigault, but may show his influence." [Ravenel, p. 60].

D. Original Plan: "As originally built, it was a rectangle from which jutted a rounded projection containing the winding staircase ... the floor plan is simplicity itself. The first and second stories had only one room on a floor, exclusive of the hall with the staircase, and the third story had only two." [Ravenel, p. 60].

E. Notes on Alterations and Additions: Northeast wing and gables of main roof probably added about 1840 [Stoney].

F. Sources of Information: Notes in the files of Samuel Gaillard Stoney, 129X Tradd Street, Charleston, S. C. Interview of June 14, 1962. News and Courier, Charleston, S. C., May 9, 1962. Beatrice St. Julien Ravenel, Architects of Charleston (Charleston: Carolina Art Association, 1945).

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: A town house with a beautiful helical stairway and interior enrichment of the Adam style, largely intact. A wing added about 1840 remains generally as built.

2. Condition of fabric: The structure appears sound and the finish is in reasonably good condition.

B. Technical Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Main portion approximately 35' x 60'; wing approximately 27' x 32'. Three stories. Faces south.

2. Foundations: Very low, continuing main walls with a slight projection a short distance above grade; stone.

3. Wall construction: Stucco over brick wall about 21" thick. Stucco has been marked with imitation stone jointing; condition is generally good although paint over the stucco is peeling off. Some minor breaks in stucco reveal large bricks characteristic of Charleston practice--3" high. Stucco appears to average 3/8" in thickness.

Walls have been braced in some places with iron or steel ties, presumably after the earthquake of 1886.

A room has been added on the first and second floors, at the west end, by filling in part of the piazza; its walls are frame with clapboards nailed direct to studding, exposure 6-1/2". Some clapboards are loose and some of the surface is in need of paint.

Gables are frame with clapboards.

4. Porches: A two-story Charleston piazza extends around three sides of the original portion of the house, five bays along the south front and three bays along each end. The first floor is paved with large pieces of weathered limestone and sandstone of varied sizes. First-floor columns are round, tapered, and stuccoed, with square blocky capitals, no bases. The second floor is of wood boards, obviously replacements; columns are of wood--unfluted Greek Doric order with two-piece entablature of simple design. The second floor has a wooden railing with turned balusters, probably replacements. Porch woodwork is somewhat in need of paint.

A relatively modern wooden stairway connects the two stories at the east end of the piazza. It appears unlikely that there was originally a stairway on the piazza.

5. Chimneys: One is located at the center of the west end of the original building, another on the north wall of the addition. Both are of brick, stuccoed above the roof line, and have triple hoods with pointed arches at the tops.

6. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: A simple doorway opens from the original building to the first and second floors of the piazza on the south side and on the west end. At the first-floor level is a simple doorway on the east end west side of the stair tower, which apparently led to the exterior originally; this one on the west still does.

At the north end of the east piazza a doorway gives access to the added wing, at first and second floor levels.

b. Windows and shutters: Double-hung wood sash set in simple square-headed masonry openings; six lights over six lights on the first story. Sash on the upper floors are presumably altered, with two lights over two lights. Windows of stair tower are arched with semicircular heads. There are no exterior shutters now.

7. Roof:

a. Shape, covering: The hipped gambrel roof over the original building was altered later to a simple gambrel form; the east and west ends have triangular gables, however, which carry up higher than the upper slopes of the roof. Along the south side is a gable with a semicircular window. In the attic can be seen some wooden shingles about 20" long which covered the roof before it was altered. The porch roof is hipped; this and the main roof are now covered with sheet metal, standing seams.

The wing at the northeast corner has a low or flat roof behind a stucco parapet, which is ornamented on the east side with two small panels containing a simple anthemion motive, placed directly over the window openings on that wall.

b. Framing: 3" x 5" sawn rafters, 18" on centers, with collar ties at the bottom of the upper slopes, with spaced nailing stripe to which the shingles were fastened. There is no ridge pole; at the ridge the rafters are mortised and tenoned, with pegs. Framing appears to be of longleaf yellow pine and is in sound condition.

c. Cornice, eaves: House cornice is of wood, and carries along the rake at the gables, with dentils. Modern sheet-metal gutters carry around the edge of the porch roof, and along the north and south sides of the house.

8. Special exterior trim: Stucco string courses mark the second and third floor lines along the east wall of the added wing.

C. Technical Description of Interiors:

1. Floor plans:

a. First floor: A single room about 20' x 30', its length extending east-west, is surrounded by a piazza on all sides except the north, where there is a U-shaped stair tower on axis. There are four bays of openings along the south wall and three along the north, two bays along the east, and two along the west, with a fireplace on axis. This is the original part of the house. The north half of the west piazza has been made into a room, now fitted up as a kitchen. Adjoining the stair tower to the east, and extending northward about 27', is a secondary stair hall with a bathroom at the north end; to the east of this stair hall is a single room about 19' wide (east-west) by 25' long, with a fireplace on axis at the north end. This wing constitutes an addition to the original house. The ceiling height is 10'-0 1/2".

b. Second floor: The layout is the same as the first floor, with a ceiling height of 10'-0".

c. Third floor: The original wing of the house is divided into two rooms; otherwise the plan is the same as the lower floors. The ceiling height is 9'-4 1/2". The piazza does not extend to this story.

d. Attic: The main stair tower extends above the third floor and gives access to a low unfinished attic space over the original wing.

2. Stairways:

a. Main stair: This extends from the ground floor to the attic, in the shape of a helix about an elliptical wall. It has an open string, with a simple rounded continuous handrail, and two turned balusters to each tread. The nosing returns at the end of each tread, with a bracket underneath of two unequal spirals, which constitute a wave motif extending the whole length of the outer string and across its horizontal continuation at the attic landing. There are 17 risers between the first and second floors, 17 between the second and third floors, and 15 to the attic landing. The whole stair is of painted wood.

Semicircular arched windows are placed on axis and at the west wall at the second and third stories, and a doorway at the first story. The wooden trim employs Roman Doric colonnettes at each jamb; they are well rounded but enclosed within a panel. The capital forms an impost block for the arch, which has an archivolt moulding. The window reveals and intrados of the arches are paneled in wood. The plaster ceiling is a rounded conical form. Ravenel calls this stairway "one of the most beautiful in Charleston" [Ravenel, op. cit., p. 60]. One might add that the proportions are very pleasing.

b. Secondary stair: This extends from the first to the third floors in straight flights with winders at each end. It appears to be relatively modern and of little interest. It is entirely of wood, with a simple railing.

3. Flooring: Most of the floors appear to be original, with longleaf yellow pine T & G boards averaging 5" in width, in good condition. The main room on the first floor has been covered with modern asphalt tile, and the room in the addition with modern narrow oak flooring. The attic is floored with wide boards.

4. Room finish:

a. Original part of house:

(1) First-floor room: Walls and ceiling are of plaster, which has been painted. Door and window openings have wood architrave trim, and reveals of openings are paneled. Doors have six panels, moulded. The room cornice is of wood, with modillions and dentils; the frieze is ornamented with gouge work simulating a triglyph and swag motive. The wood paneled wainscot has gouge work decoration along the dado rail. The fireplace is similar to the one on the second floor (see description below), with some slight differences in the ornament. All wood trim has been painted many times.

(2) Second-floor room: Walls are plastered, painted; the corners of the chimney projection have wooden corner beads. Ceiling is of plain plaster. The room cornice is of plaster, with acanthus leaves; the frieze is ornamented with an anthemion motive in relief. The doorway to the stair tower and the doorway at the northwest corner have pilasters; the entablature breaks over them. The cornice contains ornate narrow dentils alternating with double beads; in the frieze is low relief composition ornament--two swags with urns at the ends. These two wooden door heads are quite similar to the mantel in this room. The reveals are paneled in wood, and the doors have six moulded panels. Other openings have architrave trim in wood, the window reveals carrying to the floor and having paneled interior shutters.

The wooden fireplace mantel has reeded Corinthian pilasters carrying an entablature which breaks above them; the cornice breaks over the center panel in the frieze. The cornice contains ornate narrow dentils alternating with double beads. The center panel of the frieze, and the frieze over the pilasters, are ornamented with figures in low relief cast composition; in the frieze on each side of the center panel is a swag in relief. The architrave has two fascias, each ornamented with gouge work simulating a swag motive. Around the fireplace opening is a dog-tooth band and a gouge-work band of wood, framing the gray marble facing. Inside the opening is a cast-iron fire frame with Greek ornamental motifs--a honeysuckle in low relief, and a console at each side.

(3) Third-floor rooms: These have plaster walls and ceilings, papered, without a cornice. Doors have six panels; all openings have wood architrave trim. There is a simple wood wainscot.

The mantel in the west room has reeded Doric pilasters carrying an entablature, with gouge work ornament in the central panel of the frieze and over the pilasters. The cornice breaks out over the central panel and the pilasters.

(4) Rooms built into west piazza: These have walls and ceilings of matched and beaded boards. Trim is very simple.

b. Room finish - northeast wing:

(1) First-floor room: Wide wood door and window trim with corner blocks; panels below windows. Simple heavy wooden mantel with antae. High base board with mouldings.

(2) Second- and third-floor rooms: Wood architrave trim around door and window openings, the mouldings having Greek Revival profiles. Mantels similar to the one on first floor. Doors have two vertical panels.

5. Hardware: It is doubtful if any original hardware remains, although some cast-iron box locks on the third floor may be original. Doors are typically hung on two butts.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: This house occupies the lot at the northwest corner of East Bay and Amherst Streets. Within recent years East Bay Street has been extended and connected to become a busy arterial thoroughfare but old maps show that throughout the nineteenth century it was not a continuous street. At that time this neighborhood enjoyed the relative isolation of a peninsular location. At present there is a frontage on the north side of Amherst Street of about 90', and a depth of about 80'. East of East Bay Street the area is occupied by industrial and commercial companies, with large open areas. West of East Bay Street the area remains mostly residential but apparently has been deteriorating.

2. Walks, driveways: The ground level is several feet above the present sidewalk; along both sidewalks is a retaining wall of stucco on brick. Several granite steps lead up from the sidewalk on Amherst Street, near the corner, to the piazza. There is a short modern driveway from Amherst Street at the west edge of the property. At the northwest corner is a small back yard, with a modern concrete block wall at the rear and side property lines.

3. Outbuildings: Apparently there are none remaining, although it is to be expected that there would have been several originally.

Prepared by Harley J. McKee, Architect
National Park Service
June 1962

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FOLD OVER

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